

THE SafetyZone

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
FOR SAFE SCHOOLS

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CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS

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SAFE AND DRUG-FREE
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OFFICE OF JUVENILE
JUSTICE AND
DELINQUENCY PREVENTION
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JUSTICE

COMMUNITIES, INDIVIDUALS WORK TO HALT VIOLENCE

By ELIZABETH ADAMS

DEAR MR. CLINTON:

I WANT YOU TO STOP

THE KILLING IN THE CITY.

PEOPLE IS DEAD AND I THINK

THAT SOMEBODY MIGHT KILL ME.

WOULD YOU PLEASE STOP THE

PEOPLE FROM DEADING.

I'M ASKING YOU NICELY TO STOP IT.

I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT. DO IT NOW.

I KNOW YOU CAN.

YOUR FRIEND,

JAMES

Nine days after writing this letter, nine-year-old James Darby was killed in a drive-by shooting while walking home from a Mother's Day picnic with his family.

(From "Children and Youth Violence: An Overview of the Issues," by Joy D. Osofsky, in Children in a Violent Society, Joy D. Osofsky, ed., Guilford Press, 1997)

Two new national studies reflect positive trends in violence prevention, but the incidence of youth violence and school violence remains unacceptably high.

The percentage of high school students engaging in violence-related behaviors, including fighting and carrying a weapon, dropped

significantly between 1991 and 1997, according to Centers for Disease Control analysis of Youth Behavior Risk Surveys published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in August. The percentage of students who reported they had carried a weapon during the previous 30 days dropped from 26.1 percent in 1991 to 18.3 percent in 1997. Similarly, U.S. Department of Education figures for the 1996-97 and 1997-98 school years showed a decline of 31 percent in the number of students expelled for bringing guns and other weapons to school.

Advocates for safe schools continue to work on a variety of fronts, ranging from gun-control legislation to education about firearm safety and conflict resolution training. The three profiles that follow highlight individuals and community groups attempting to reduce violence among young people.

Student Pledge Against Gun Violence

The Student Pledge Against Gun Violence calls for a day of national observance on October 21 that will give stu-



dents throughout the country the chance to sign a voluntary promise, reading: "I will never bring a gun to school; I will never use a gun to settle a dispute; I will use my influence with my friends to keep them from using guns to settle disputes. My individual choices and actions, when multiplied by those of young people throughout the country,

will make a difference. Together, by honoring this pledge, we can reverse the violence and grow up in safety."

Younger children can sign a pledge that reads: "If I see a gun, I won't touch it. I will remember that any gun I see might be loaded. I know how important it is to keep myself safe."

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BASEBALL STAR
SAMMY SOSA
SUPPORTS
THE PLEDGE.

The Student Pledge Against Gun Violence (www.pledge.org), which has been endorsed by such organizations as American Federation of Teachers, Council of Great City Schools, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of Student Councils, National School Boards Association, and American Association of School Administrators, among others, is the brainchild of Mary Lewis Grow of Minneapolis.

Gun violence, Grow believes, causes “many, many casualties even beyond the people killed. It affects people’s sense of trust and safety.” In 1994, after years of being concerned about gun violence, Grow was talking to a friend on the school board in Minneapolis. “We were trying to think of something we could do for school kids to give them a sense of power and control—something they could do to make an impact. There is power in simultaneity. It would be very powerful if there was one designated day where all the schools would distribute to students a contract, promising not to solve their problems with guns. I think it’s important to have something that can pull kids up and out of the walls of the classroom.”

Grow and her friend took the idea a step further. “Why stop at the walls

of Minneapolis? Why not spread this throughout the state? In fact, why not go national?” they asked. “One board member took this to the national meeting for the Council of Great City Schools. I started making the rounds and talking to people. I realized if this was going to fly, it would take somebody prominent to get it attention.”

In 1996, Senator Bill Bradley agreed to write a Senate resolution calling for a nationally observed day of concern about young people and gun violence. “The senators Bradley got to sign on with him ranged from very conservative to very liberal ones,” says Grow. “Almost inadvertently, this has given people a nonpolitical, nonpolarized way to focus on the issue of young people and gun violence.”

“Kids are hungry for ways to effect change,” Grow adds. “I’ve been very distressed by conversations about the recent school shootings. Most of the conversations are adults wringing their hands and saying, ‘What are we going to do about these young people and their gun violence?’ We are not honoring young people with the role they can play. We are not letting them be partners in the solution. They want to have a role.”

In 1998, more than a million student pledges were signed and reported. The

goal this year is two million pledges.

Joey Johnson, Student Body President at East Henderson High School in North Carolina and North Carolina coordinator of the Student Pledge Against Gun Violence, is confident the goal will be exceeded. Johnson, who plans to become an attorney, says, “My uncle is a teacher, and my mom is a teacher. Education has always been a big thing with me. I hate to see our public schools and classrooms taken over by violence. The student pledge is an opportunity for students all over the country to stand up and with one voice say, ‘Gun violence will go no further. It stops with us.’ I’m all for students saying what they think. It’s great if they can do it together.”

Evaristo Vasquez, who is on the state board for the California Association of Student Leaders, met Mary Lewis Grow at the Student Council Conference in Minnesota this year. When he learned that Los Angeles had not participated in the pledge in previous years, he decided, “It would be real nice to see if I could get something started here, just to get students to think and see reality.” Vasquez, who plans to study political science after he graduates this spring, adds, “Growing up in Los Angeles, it is common to hear about school shootings.

WHAT CAN STUDENTS DO?

How can students participate in the Day of National Concern about Young People and Gun Violence on October 21?

- Take the Student Pledge materials (available on the Web at www.pledge.org) to your principal, school superintendent, student council representative, and/or guidance counselors. Tell them you would like your school and your city’s schools to take part.
- Call your mayor and ask if s/he will

issue a proclamation calling for the Day of Concern to be observed in your city.

- Ask your public library to display appropriate books such as *The Gorp’s Gift* by Sherri Chesson, *Just One Flick of a Finger* by Marybeth Lorbiecki, *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Myers, and *Twelve Shots: Outstanding Short Stories About Guns*, edited by Harry Mazer.
- Plan a Pledge march or town rally.
- Call your place of worship and ask for support. In Nashville last year, 275 churches came together to form an alliance to support the young people’s

pledge, and to call on parents to sign a pledge of their own, promising to keep guns inaccessible to their children.

- Call your favorite radio station and ask if they will donate an hour of air time on the Day of Concern. Last year in Chicago a local rock station donated an hour of commercial-free time to a call-in show about kids and gun violence. Both U.S. senators from Illinois, the police chief, the superintendent, two teenagers, and Chicago Cubs home run-hitter Sammy Sosa all took part.

I wanted to see if I could make a difference in someone's life."

Vasquez hopes to organize different activities for each day during the week of the Day of National Concern. A tree planting to memorialize students who have died from gun violence is planned for Monday, October 18. Holy Trinity Parish Catholic Church will hold a mass at 6:45 a.m. on Thursday, October 21. An alternative band, Red Headphone, has donated 45 minutes of their time, and is working with a local radio station to organize a dance on Friday, October 22. Vasquez is also working with local elementary schools to organize events for younger students.

Individuals Making a Difference

Dr. Linda Erwin, a trauma physician, and trauma nurse Joanne Fairchild, both of Legacy Emanuel Hospital in Portland, Oregon, make presentations to students on a number of safety issues, including firearms. They collaborated with Multnomah County Juvenile Justice, Portland Public Schools, the Oregon Peace Institute, and the gang resource intervention team of the Portland Police, among others,

to create Save Our Youth (SOY), a program for juvenile offenders and their parents that clarifies false assumptions young people make about guns, and also provides training on communication skills and anger management.

Erwin assisted with the development of a collaborative training given by the Seattle Police Department and Physicians for Social Responsibility. Options and Consequences (also known as "Cops, Docs, and DA's") focuses on the medical and legal consequences of using a gun or carrying a gun to school. Doctors, police officers, and district attorneys tell personal stories about what they've seen and experienced. The program has been expanded to Virginia Beach and Oklahoma City; Oregon Ceasefire is in the process of adapting the program for use in Oregon, as well.

The program, says Erwin, is "presented by health people who are not coming from either an anti- or pro-gun perspective. What we're telling the kids is, 'We want you to stay safe. I don't want to see you on my operating table. I don't want to have to go out and tell your parents that, despite my best efforts, you are dead.'"

Working as a doctor in England helped motivate Erwin to get involved in this issue. "When I worked there I didn't see a single bullet hole in three years. They have quite a gun culture in Britain, but it is different. There, it is focused around sporting. Brits are not into handguns. They still have some cops without guns," she said. In the inner-city Portland hospital where she works now, Erwin says she commonly sees one or two gunshot wounds per six-hour shift.

Erwin says she was particularly affected by one patient, "an average kid, not stupid, who was wheeled in with a gunshot wound and said, 'I didn't know this would hurt.' How could he not know it would hurt?" That prompted her to consider where most people get their information about gun-related injuries. "The obvious answer is television and the movies. On television, they never show the impact of a shooting: the funeral, the impact on the person who pulled the trigger. How can a kid be safe making choices about guns if that is the only information he gets?" Erwin explains, "We try to get the right information out.

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DR. LINDA ERWIN ASKS KIDS, "HOW WILL VIOLENCE INTERFERE WITH YOUR HOPES AND DREAMS?"

WORKING TO REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE

The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence (www.cphv.org) recommends four steps in preventing accidental and intentional violent gun-related acts by children:

- Keep guns away from children. Don't keep a gun at home, but if you do, unload it and lock it up. Do not store ammunition in the same place as the gun.
- Make sure your children know the dangers of guns and not to touch or handle guns. Children should not touch a gun they come across in a friend's home or elsewhere in the

community. Rather, they should immediately get help from a parent or trusted adult.

- Talk to your children about guns and violence. Explain to them what we all have strong emotions like anger or fear, but these feelings can be expressed without striking out at self or others, or using weapons.
- Talk to your children about the differences between media violence and real violence.

Handgun Control (www.handgun-control.org), the nation's largest citizens' gun control lobbying organization, chaired by Sarah Brady, points to seven loopholes in current gun legislation that give children easy access

to firearms:

- Parents are not required to keep loaded firearms out of the reach of children.
- Private collectors can sell guns without background checks at gun shows and flea markets.
- Private gun owners do not have to keep records with respect to whom they sell their guns.
- Gun manufacturers and stores are not required to lock up their guns when the factory or store is closed.
- Gun manufacturers are not required to make guns that are safer and less accessible to children and others.
- In most states, juveniles can pur-

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RESOURCES

Toolkit Available

A wealth of information relating to school safety is included in a new CD-ROM toolkit produced by the National Resource Center for Safe Schools. The electronic resource, designed for ease of use, contains reports, newsletters, and fact sheets published by the Center along with materials from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Hamilton Fish Institute, and others. To obtain a copy of this free resource, call NRCSS at 1-800-268-2275, or e-mail a request to safeschools@nwrel.org.

Training via Satellite

A national school safety network, created through public-private partnership, will use hundreds of donated satellite dishes to bring research-based training to teachers, other school personnel, and community groups across the country. Announced in June at a White House conference on mental health, the net-

work is a partnership of the National Education Association, EchoStar Communications, Future View, and the Learning First Alliance. The U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services are providing funding, expert assistance, and other resources.

The first of 10 training sessions, planned for January, will focus on identifying warning signs of troubled youth and identifying resources to help them. Future sessions are expected to focus on such topics as promoting respect for diversity, common-sense security precautions, and creating parent-community partnerships.

EchoStar, a direct broadcast satellite company based in Littleton, Colorado, is donating 1,000 satellite television systems to the partnership. The Learning First Alliance includes 12 organizations representing more than 10 million parents, teachers, school administrators, and others working to improve education. To be eligible for a satellite dish, schools or education associations need to form partnerships with at least four other community organizations—such

as parent groups, law enforcement agencies, mental health services, religious organizations, or social service agencies—and develop a plan for how the partners will use the information from the broadcasts.

For more information: www.nea.org/issues/safeschool/echostar/.

Schools Survey

A new national survey about public school safety indicates that teachers and students are more likely to feel safe at school now than five years ago, reflecting a decrease in violence across the country. However, The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1999: Violence in America's Public Schools also points out "the broad reach of school violence." One in four students and one in six public school teachers have been the victim of a violent act that took place in or around school, according to the survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates.

The full report is available online at: www.metlife.com/.

UNDERSTANDING HEALTH RISKS OF FIREARMS

Firearm injuries pose a significant public health issue for young people in the United States. According to James A. Mercy and Mark L. Rosenberg in their 1997 article "Preventing Firearm Violence in and Around Schools," when the number of firearms-related homicides, suicides, and unintentional injuries for 1992 were added together, they ranked as the fifth-leading cause of death for five- to nine-year-olds, and the second-leading cause of death for 10- to 19-year-olds.

Further research indicates that:

- The primary context for firearm injuries is interpersonal violence
- The problem has a disproportionate impact on male children and adolescents, and the risk of injury increases with age
- Firearms are involved in a high proportion of lethal violence that affects school-age children, and appear to play a significant role in the increasing lethality of interpersonal violence among adolescents during the past decade
- Most researchers attribute the increased lethality to greater access to firearms and a greater willingness to

use firearms (a 1993 poll by LH Research, Inc., indicated that 59 percent of sixth- to 12th-grade students polled said they could obtain a handgun if they needed one, and two-thirds of these indicated they could obtain a handgun within 24 hours)

■ Children who witness firearm violence can suffer psychological trauma, and this impact of firearm injuries on children can adversely affect individual development and the educational climate in schools

TEACHERS ASKED TO PLAY NEW ROLE IN PREVENTION

If a student writes a vivid story about a lonely teen who plots a prom-night revenge against the peers who taunt and torment her, is the young writer issuing a call for help? Or just exercising an active imagination?

In the wake of recent school shootings, the would-be Stephen Kings of the classroom could find themselves referred to mental health experts if they put such violent thoughts on paper. Many school districts are adopting policies that require teachers to report student behavior—including creative writing and art making—that fits a specific profile or displays warning signs of potential violence.

“Common sense tells us that every teacher should be alert to violent, homicidal, or suicidal writing,” said Dr. Scott Poland, president-elect of the National Association of School Psychologists and a leader of crisis-response teams after school shootings in Arkansas, Kentucky, and Colorado. Since the Columbine High School shootings, committed by two students who reportedly wrote about violence in class essays, “We’re in a whole new era,” Poland said in an interview with the National Resource Center for Safe Schools.

Students who write about violence, Poland said, “are crying out for attention and help. Let’s give it to them—in a mental health way, not in a punitive way.” A teacher who sees violence in a student’s writing, he added, “needs to share it with a school counselor, school psychologist, or administrator.”

Districts may want to provide staff training to help teachers sort out their role in violence prevention. Some teachers, for example, are concerned about censorship issues if they screen student writing or artwork for signs of potential violence. District guidelines can clarify students’ rights and teachers’ responsibilities. Staff meetings can also provide a forum for teachers to discuss potential warning signs, the role caring adults can play in prevention, and when to enlist help from mental health professionals.

Experts stress the importance of getting to know students better as a step in violence prevention. Student expression “is a way to deal with issues,” Howard C. Stevenson, a professor of education in the community and clinical child psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania, told *Education Week*. “Whether it’s in their music, writing, dance, or athletics, kids are going to tell us something about what’s going on with them. Do we see something as potentially a cry for help? The teacher has to make a judgment.”

In *Early Warning, Timely Response*, the 1998 report by the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice, one of the 16 early warning signs is the “expression of violence in writing and drawings.” The National School Safety Center has developed a profile based on students who have caused violent deaths on campus. The list of 20 characteristics includes

three related to creative expression: consistently prefers TV shows, movies, or music expressing violent themes and acts; prefers reading materials dealing with violent themes, rituals, and abuse; reflects anger, frustration, and the dark side of life in school essays or writing projects.

The authors of *Early Warning, Timely Response* urge caution in evaluating student work. “Many children produce work about violent themes that for the most part is harmless when taken in context,” the authors point out. “Because there is a real danger in misdiagnosing such a sign, it is important to seek the guidance of a qualified professional—such as a school psychologist, counselor, or other mental health specialist—to determine its meaning.”

In evaluating students, mental health experts should strike a helpful rather than a punitive tone, according to Poland. “I’d tell students: ‘The things you’ve written about have us worried. How can we help you?’ And I’d get specific: ‘Are these your own thoughts or desires?’” If a student writes in explicit detail about harming a specific person or group of persons, Poland cautioned, “Then I’d also notify law enforcement.”

For teachers of creative subjects, this heightened awareness of mental health issues can mean changes in classroom practices. Some teachers are issuing ground rules along with grammar lessons. “I tell students in advance that I may have to inform guidance counselors if their writing raises concerns about serious issues, including violence,” explained a writing teacher.

The threat of lawsuits further complicates the teacher’s role. According to *Education Week*, a San Francisco student sued his school district after he was suspended over an essay that described “starting a riot and killing the principal.” The student claimed the work was fiction, not a threat of real violence. Teachers have also been sued, Poland says, “if they did not come forward when students produced violent writing,” and the students later acted out real violence.

Teachers are finding their own creative ways to address these issues. Since the Columbine shootings in April, teachers have posted hundreds of suggestions and concerns on an active bulletin board on school violence maintained by the National Council of Teachers of English (www.ncte.org).

Teachers of all subjects can pursue “teachable moments,” Poland suggests, to help students discuss violence prevention, respect, and tolerance for others. “If you’re going to teach *Romeo and Juliet*,” he says, citing the Shakespeare play that ends in a double teen suicide, “then have a dialogue about alternatives to suicide.”

—Suzie Boss

TEACHERS CAN PURSUE
“TEACHABLE MOMENTS”
TO HELP STUDENTS DISCUSS
VIOLENCE PREVENTION,
RESPECT, AND TOLERANCE
FOR OTHERS.

ARTS PROGRAMS OFFER ENGAGING LESSONS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

In some of San Antonio's toughest neighborhoods, the end of the school day used to be prime time for gangs to try to recruit younger members. But an after-school program called Urban smARTS now keeps nearly 500 middle-schoolers off the streets, out of trouble, and engaged in creative learning activities such as dance, music, theater, and visual arts.

On Chicago's West Side, kids from poor families who once felt bypassed by the Information Age are now able to drop in at a neighborhood media lab and learn how to use video cameras, computers, and other high-tech equipment. A program called Street-Level Youth Media not only gives impoverished young people access to communications tools, but also a forum to express views on violence, racism, and other sources of conflict in their lives.

These community-based programs, among 10 honored for excellence last year by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, demonstrate the potential of arts programs to help vulnerable young people tackle problems creatively and without violence.

"The arts are a natural forum for teaching, modeling, and using conflict resolution processes," according to *Conflict Resolution and the Arts*, a fact sheet published in 1998 by the Justice Department's OJJDP. Authors Marianne Klink, former federal liaison for the National Endowment for the Arts, and Donna Crawford, Project Director of the National Center for Conflict Resolution Education, explain that conflict resolution skills "can provide tools for creating more peaceable environments within arts programs and within families, schools, and communities."

Effective conflict resolution education, according to Klink and Crawford, invites individuals to "understand multiple perspectives, identify interests, express points of view, and invent solu-

tions that provide for mutual gain."

These activities are similar to the processes involved in making art.

According to a national arts advocacy organization called Americans for the Arts, youth arts programs can be "powerful crime prevention tools. They offer safe, engaging, and constructive environments for young people who lack adult supervision during non-school hours, a time when they are most vulnerable to community violence and gang recruitment."

Recognizing the "natural affinity" between conflict resolution education and the arts, the Justice Department's OJJDP and the National Endowment for the Arts, in cooperation with the National Center for Conflict Resolution Education, have launched a national leadership initiative to offer workshops on conflict resolution education for adults who work with community-based arts programs. Art in Peacemaking workshops teach artists and other staff members how to ease tensions by using conflict resolution skills and processes. These skills help keep the peace in community-based programs, and also give adults a chance to "walk the talk" by creatively resolving disputes with participating youth. For 1999-2000, an additional 10 arts programs across the country are involved in conflict resolution training through the Art in Peacemaking program.

Why are arts programs so effective in reaching vulnerable youth? As Americans for the Arts explains in a recent report, "Arts programs are successful at attracting, engaging, and retaining even the toughest kids." What draws them to the arts? Americans for the Arts cites these factors:

- The thrill of creative and artistic expression
- Community recognition for performances, exhibitions, or public art works
- Learning new job skills
- Learning how to use the arts to com-

municate difficult thoughts and emotions

These resources provide more information about how community-based arts programs can foster creative problem solving:

■ Americans for the Arts offers publications and resources on arts programs for at-risk youth, including a new multimedia program called Youtharts Development Project Toolkit. Write to: 100 Vermont Avenue NW, 12th Floor, Washington, DC 20005. Phone: (202) 371-2830 or 1-800-321-4510. Web address: www.artsusa.org.

■ *ArtWorks! Prevention Programs for Youth & Communities* (a 1997 publication supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in cooperation with the Tucson-Pima Arts Council and La Frontera Center Inc.) provides descriptions of successful programs, along with extensive resources. Copies are available from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, Maryland 20847. Phone: 1-800-729-6686.

■ Coming Up Taller, a program of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, hosts a Web site that includes descriptions of effective programs, links to other resources, and the full text of the 1996 report *Coming Up Taller: Arts and Humanities Programs for Children and Youth at Risk*. Web address: www.cominguptaller.org.

■ National Center for Conflict Resolution Education provides training and technical assistance in schools, juvenile justice settings, youth service organizations, and community partnerships programs. Contact at: 110 West Main Street, Urbana, Illinois 61801. Phone: 1-800-308-9419. Web address: www.nccre.org.



MAKE PUBLIC INFORMATION PART OF CRISIS PLAN

Recent high-profile events on school campuses have prompted school public information officers to plan how they would respond in the event of crisis. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) drew record attendance to its annual conference in July with a slate of workshops and training sessions on preparing for and working through a school crisis.

"The middle of a crisis is no time to start training your staff or making decisions," cautioned Frank Kwan, Director of Communications for the Los Angeles County Office of Education. "Prepare now."

In Los Angeles County, home to 1.7 million students in 81 districts, school public information officers meet regularly to share resources and plan how to help one another in the event of disaster. Similarly, school public information personnel in Colorado have begun setting up a "buddy system" so that PR specialists can help their peers in neighboring districts.

Veterans of the Littleton, Colorado, tragedy shared the public relations lessons learned in the glare of an international media spotlight. Immediately after the crisis erupted at Columbine High, NSPRA sent a team of volunteers, skilled in public relations, to help the Colorado district deal with hundreds of calls a day from newspapers and broadcast reporters.

After the Columbine tragedy, Rick Kaufman, Executive Director of Public Engagement and Communications for Jefferson County Public Schools, said the top goal for his office "was to help our students and staff heal and get back to a sense of normalcy." Each request for an interview by the media was filtered through the question: "Will this contribute to the healing process?" His office also set up ground rules for members of the media to follow.

Kaufman and his staff worked to com-

bat reporting errors by putting out daily fact sheets and Web updates. Still, he estimated, "at least 80 percent" of the coverage was marked by "myths and inaccuracies."

Nora Carr of the Cooperating School Districts in St. Louis, one of the NSPRA volunteers in Littleton, encouraged public relations officers in other communities "to take care of your local media first" in the event of crisis. "It may seem counter intuitive," she admitted, "but those are the folks who will be there with you long after the national camera crews pack up and leave." If a school crisis swamps switchboards with calls from the media, Carr added, "you won't be able to get back to everyone who wants an interview." She recommended that public relations staffs triage calls, with local media given top priority, "then concentrate on the national media (such as CNN and *The New York Times*) that drive the rest of the world."

To improve internal communications after a crisis, PR experts advise making "strategic phone calls" to key community members, such as the local PTA president. "That will get accurate information out that day and combat the rumor mill," Carr said. Telephone hot lines, Web sites, and e-mail can also be effective in getting timely, accurate information to community members and school personnel during and after a crisis.

Jim Cummings, Public Relations Director for the Phoenix Union High School District, encourages PR specialists to "communicate with parents what schools are doing to prevent violence." His district, which includes 10 urban high schools, has developed and tested its media crisis plan. During the heat of a crisis, Cummings suggests, "Let your principal take care of the students and staff, and let trained PR experts take care of the media."

NSPRA has developed two training tools to help schools:

■ *The Complete Crisis Communications Management Manual for Schools* is a 180-page guide to dealing with the media, community, and internal audiences during and after a school crisis or disaster. Materials for inservice workshops are included, along with a step-by-step approach to take during the first 30 minutes of a crisis.

■ *Thinking About the Unthinkable: Seeking Solutions to School Violence* is a 47-minute video that, despite its title, focuses on strategies and guidelines to help schools prepare for the possibility of violence. The video covers crisis plan preparation, communication networks, safety and security checks, dealing with the media, and handling the aftermath of a crisis. There is a brief look at intervention techniques and programs aimed at preventing violence.

For information, contact: NSPRA, 15948 Derwood Road, Rockville, MD 20855. Phone: (301) 519-0496. Web: www.nspira.org.

WORKING: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

chase or be in possession of assault weapons.

- Young adults aged 18-21 can legally purchase handguns.

Advocates of additional gun control legislation that would close some of these loopholes include President Clinton and Suzann Wilson, the mother of one of the victims of the school shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, as well as a number of Colorado high school students who formed a political action group called SAFE. But recent efforts to pass additional gun control legislation have stalled. For updates on proposed legislation, see: www.handguncontrol.org/legislation.htm and <http://thomas.loc.gov>.

REACH CHILDREN EARLY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Editor's note: When she was in the seventh grade, Joanna Belcher began volunteering at James Wilson Safe Harbour, a shelter serving "the homeless and potentially homeless" in her hometown of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. During the past six years, she has worked as a resident mentor with families, assisted in administration projects, and taught a preschool class. Through the local Communities That Care organization, she helped to begin an evening mentoring program for students in grades four through seven and planned a youth forum in conjunction with the Governor's Community Partnership for Safe Children. Now 18, she will be a freshman at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., this fall, planning to major in psychology and sociology. After graduation, she hopes to work in some way with homeless children and families. A member of advisory committee for the National Resource Center for Safe Schools, Joanna agreed to share some of her experiences with our readers.

Keoin was one of my first preschool students, a lively four-year-old boy with mischievous brown eyes and a crooked smile. Like most other children his age, Keoin had a short attention span but also possessed a love for learning and exploring new things.

However, Keoin and the other children who have passed through my class differ from most preschoolers in one frightening way—they are homeless. After volunteering for nearly four years at James Wilson Safe Harbour, a local homeless shelter, I began to realize the inadequacy of services for young children. While their older siblings could escape to school, Big Brother/Big Sister outings, and evening mentoring programs, the

younger children spend the day in the shelter's stuffy, cramped apartments. By the time the connection with the public school system takes place, violent behaviors and setbacks in language and social skills have often already developed. Automatically, these children are put at a huge disadvantage.

I began "teaching" during my junior year of high school. During class, we sang, played games, colored, and made art projects. Hoping to provide some consistency in their lives, I tried to make class as structured as possible. Although families could remain at Safe Harbour for up to one year, many had jumped between apartments and friends' homes before arriving.

Constantly moving from one home to another often caused the children to fall behind developmentally. Even tasks considered simple for the average small child could present difficulties in my preschool. I spent one class with my hand covering the tiny fingers of Christina, a four-year-old, as we drew the number one over and over again. Christina rarely spoke. Her glazed eyes and pale skin caused her to resemble a fragile china doll. Eventually becoming frustrated, I left to work with another child. I will never forget the words I heard next, the first time Christina had ever spoken a whole sentence voluntarily. "I did it, Joanna, I did it!" Sure enough, on her paper was her very own, beautifully drawn number one.

The children with whom I've worked have taught me far more than I could ever teach them. Yet I am angered by the unfairness of their situation. Many of the children have been abused or neglected. Three of the preschoolers in my class lived for months with their mother,

who kept them in a locked bedroom all day long with only a box of cereal to eat. Now staggering behind developmentally, will they ever stand a fair chance?

We wonder why children turn to crime and violence, and we ask why interacting with peers is so difficult for some. Instead, I believe it is time to examine what we are doing wrong. The shortage of programs such as Head Start in our country is saddening. In order to make high schools more peaceful and to improve education, it is essential that children be reached at an early age—the younger the better. These children show staggering potential. With encouragement and early intervention, even the greatest disadvantages can be overcome.

We invite readers of *The Safety Zone* to share ideas about creating and promoting safe schools. Help generate a national dialogue about peaceful schools. Write to us at: National Resource Center for Safe Schools, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, Oregon 97204, or submit letters electronically at safeschools@nwrel.org.

GUEST COLUMN

By JOANNA BELCHER



MOVING FROM ONE HOME TO ANOTHER CAN CAUSE CHILDREN TO FALL BEHIND DEVELOPMENTALLY.

COMMUNITIES: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

And we try to show them alternatives. We ask them, 'What are your hopes and dreams for yourself? How will violence interfere?'"

Erwin acknowledges that her work in a trauma unit can be heartbreaking. "In order to stay in this field, I had to get into prevention," she says. "I love getting out, talking to the kids. Taking the time to come talk to these kids makes them think they're valued. They keep in touch with me. That's really cool."

Kids Buying Back Guns

Shortly after the Columbine High School tragedy in Colorado, the Los Angeles Police Commission organized an evening meeting at El Sereno Middle School. Students in Ernie Delgado's seventh-grade history class made a presentation. "If you know someone who has been injured, shot, or killed in our community, stand up," they told the assembled audience. The entire audience stood. Then, "How many hear gun shots at least once a week?" Again, the entire audience stood.

Ernie Delgado says his students wanted to show the police that "a number of students walking back and forth to school are fearful for their lives every day." The students asked Chief Bernard Parks if he would come back to the school in June to discuss crime strategies and community policing, and he agreed. In May, Delgado asked his students to propose some of their own solutions to community violence. Together they came up with the idea for funding a gun buy-back program. With the principal's approval, Delgado sent permission slips to the parents of his 160 students. More than 100 parents returned the slips.

By selling chocolates, the kids raised more than \$2,000. As news of the project spread, contributions brought the total to more than \$2,600. The kids voted to pay \$100 per gun, after debating the incentive value of cash versus the value of

being able to buy more guns for fewer dollars each. Students then contacted the Hollenbeck Division of the Los Angeles Police Department.

The captain of the division was very supportive, but told the kids, "People will not come forward if they own guns illegally and know they will have to give names and addresses." And these, says Delgado, "are the people we are trying to reach: a student's cousin, for example, who is 17, a gang member, and who wants to leave that lifestyle." The kids, says Delgado, "felt the police restrictions were too strict." Next they met with Edith Perez, former president of the Police Commission. She was very supportive, but again told them that state law required obtaining names and addresses.

"The kids are disappointed," Delgado acknowledged in July, "but they have made this commitment and are going to honor it." They will donate money left over to the LAPD for future buy-back programs, and will request that in the future the police department relax restrictions.

Seventh-grader Samantha Diaz says she has learned, "It takes a lot of work and effort to do stuff like that. Some people don't like what you are doing, and other people encourage you along the way." Samantha says she hopes that "other people will get the idea, not just people in our community. We want people to get the idea that selling their guns would be a good idea to stop the crime." Samantha says she can "hear" crime in her neighborhood: "people yelling and screaming and fighting and the gun shots and everything. I don't feel safe, but since I've lived here for a long time, I've gotten used to it."

Samantha wants to be a doctor or a lawyer when she grows up: "Both ways you can help out a community," she says. "A doctor can help somebody by saving a life; lawyers can involve them-

selves by telling somebody what is right and what isn't." Asked what is the most important thing we can do to prevent violence, she says, "The most important thing is to try to get along, first of all. If that doesn't help, try to settle the differences. And if you still don't get along, just don't talk to each other. I don't think violence is the main thing you should do if you don't get along with somebody."

Student Jenny Morales says she was motivated to help with the buy-back program "just by the thought of cleaning up the community. I know people who've been shot," she adds. "A week before the school year ended there was a guy by my house who shot himself." Jenny hopes that, as a result of the buy-back program, "less and less people will have guns in their homes and there will be less probability of people dying."

When the Gun Buy-Back Program took place at the El Sereno Senior Citizens Center on August 14, more than 50 people attended to exchange their weapons for cash. The fund was completely disbursed. "The kids were happy to get to do the program," Delgado said, "but disappointed that they couldn't do it with anonymity. The kids would like to schedule another buy-back program this year if they can succeed in changing the state law requiring that Californians who participate in gun exchanges must provide their name and address. It would be a good lesson for the kids to work with government officials to see if they can change that law. At a program in D.C. week before last, they used up \$30,000 in a few hours, but they had anonymity there."

STUDENTS WANTED TO
SHOW THE POLICE THAT
A NUMBER OF STUDENTS
WALKING BACK AND FORTH
TO SCHOOL ARE FEARFUL
FOR THEIR LIVES EVERY DAY.

CALENDAR

**October 19 and
November 30**

Second and third videoconferences in the three-part series, Lessons Learned: Breaking the Cycle of Violence II, will be broadcast by the HOPE Foundation. "Comprehensive Prevention Planning" will be broadcast in October. "Containing Crisis: Managing School and Community Emergencies" will be broadcast in November. Content is appropriate for school staffs, parent groups, communities, law enforcement officials, and others working to create safe school environments. For downlink information or to order a videotape of any of the broadcasts, contact: HOPE Foundation, 1252 Loesch Road, P.O. Box 906, Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0906. Phone: (812) 337-7703, or toll free, 1-800-698-8025.

November 3-6

National Conference on Preventing Crime: Realizing America's Future, takes place in Washington, D.C., sponsored by National Crime Prevention Council and the Crime Prevention Coalition of America. For information: National Crime Prevention Council, 1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor, Washington, DC 20006-3817. Phone: (202) 261-4165. Web site: www.ncpc.org.

**November 8-10 and
December 15-17**

In addition to other activities, the Improving America's Schools regional conferences, in Salt Lake City (November) and Chicago (December), will host a Creating Safe Schools & Healthy Students institute. The institutes will focus on identifying services to support comprehensive schools and communitywide strategies that promote healthy childhood development and academic success for all students. For information call 1-800-203-5494. To register, contact: Continuing Education Registration, The University of Oklahoma, 1700 Asp Avenue, Room B-1, Norman, OK 73072. Phone 1-800-522-0772, ext. 2248.

November 18-20

Second Joint National School/Community Conference on Youth Violence and Substance Abuse, sponsored by Safe Schools Coalition Inc., takes place in Orlando, Florida. Programs are planned to assess the extent and character of youth violence and substance abuse; examine school and community prevention and intervention programs; consider alternatives to helping youth offenders and victims; build collaboration among community groups; and address legal and policy issues. For information: Safe Schools Coalition Inc., P.O. Box 1338, Holmes Beach, Florida 34218-1338. Phone: (941) 778-6652. Web: www.ed.mtu.edu/safe/

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